

MIDDLE EAST

GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY

**When the
world was
forced to**

PAUSE

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**EXPLORING
SELF-ISOLATION
FROM
RAMALLAH
TO RIYADH**

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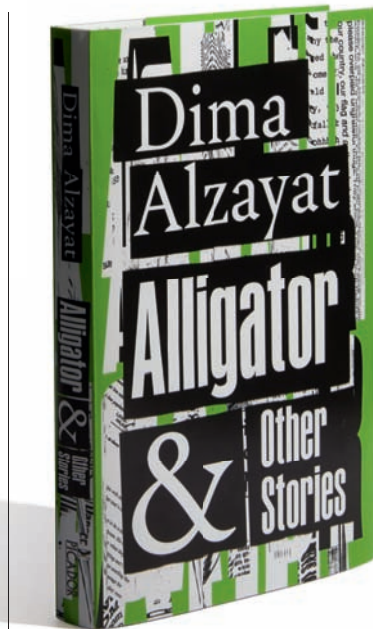
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It's tough to remember a time when the conversation on Arab-American relations didn't revolve around disenfranchisement and tension, certainly when living in a post-9/11 era. But the fact is there's far more to contemporary Arab-American identity, as a new book by Damascus-born, California-raised author Dima Alzayat explains.

"I wanted to explore what Arab-American belonging looks like and how individuals are shaped, not only by particular Arab cultures or diaspora communities, but also how a specifically American culture and environment grants or denies them agency," explains Alzayat of her debut short story collection, *Alligator and Other Stories*, released this month.

That's not to say that the book avoids tension altogether. The centrepiece story 'Alligator', for example, is a compilation of first-person accounts, newspaper clippings, letters and social media posts about a Syrian-American couple and a vigilante lynch mob. But just as the Arab-American experience is multifaceted, so too is *Alligator*.

Throughout its eight stories, Alzayat's debut explores gender, family, intergenerational trauma, assimilation and race. Crucially, the stories evoke displacement in a variety of ways: as a Syrian, as an Arab, as an immigrant and as a woman. Alzayat, who lives in Manchester and is currently a PhD student and associate lecturer at Lancaster University, says it's important for her to tell stories through the lens of everyday scenarios. Whether that's a young woman looking back on a childhood with her brother in 'Ghusl', or harbouring career ambitions in 'Only Those Who Struggle Succeed'. "These are the stories that interest me the most," she says. "Feeling like you're outside or on the margins of something, whether



that's a social group or an entire society, can lead to valuable insights."

Throughout the stories, a feeling of otherness underpins everything. To Alzayat, this was essential because, well, that's how she experiences the world, too. "I was born in Syria and lived there until I was seven. I still very much remember what it was like to arrive in the US and not speak English and feel very much on the outside of things. That feeling never really went away," she recalls. "Now I'm a Syrian-American living in the UK and that feeling is renewed. It makes me pay attention to who else might feel othered, too, and the kind of stories to be found in that space."

The book also grapples with questions around immigration and how identity can be in a state of flux as an immigrant. "Making identity central to my writing is an attempt to reflect the reality that it keeps so many people excluded or marginalised from certain spaces, opportunities or conversations," she says. "All of the different identities that people have, whether we are talking about race,

gender or anything else, significantly affect the kinds of lives they'll live."

Given that characters' ethnicities are revealed early on in stories about diasporic communities and immigrants, one story from the collection stands out.

The Patient Pursuit of Nuance

Syrian-American author Dima Alzayat is the latest in a string of Arab and Middle Eastern female writers to present a more modern portrait of identity

WORDS LAYLA HAIDRANI

'Disappearance' features protagonists whose ethnicities are not central – nor even vital. "So much of the diaspora and immigrant fiction that gets published centres ethnicity as the sole defining trait of a character or a family or a community," she Alzayat. "While it's important, it often replaces other themes or concerns, and that's something I wanted to push beyond."

Alligator and Other Stories is part of a surge of releases from female writers from the Arab diaspora in recent years, alongside Palestinian-American Etan Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*, Lebanese-British Zahra Hankir's anthology collection, *Our Women on the Ground*, and Egyptian-Brit Alia Moore's part-memoir *The Greater Freedom*. Like these authors, it could be argued that *Alligator* offers an alternative narrative of women in the US from the Arab or Middle Eastern diaspora, away from sensationalist or tired tropes. However, Alzayat is keen to distance herself from this idea. "I don't think I can, or should try to, represent or reshape a region or a people. That isn't really a responsibility that a writer can lay claim to," she maintains. "Who gets to write and who gets to be published is linked to factors that privilege certain backgrounds and languages over others."

Even so, there's no denying the positive effect of literature published about women of Arab heritage, by women of Arab heritage.

"This means that that we are writing about ourselves, instead of only being written about," says Alzayat. "The more voices in the mix, the better!" It's an opinion that comes with the caveat of representing the women often represented poorly in the media. "At a time when Arabs and Muslims are demonised socially and politically in the US, the UK and elsewhere, as an Arab-American woman, I think my voice can be a valuable contribution to the stories that those communities have to tell."

Ultimately though, Alzayat hopes she'll succeed in her goal to show readers that identity is significantly more complex than we perhaps recognise. "I hope to have presented a multiplicity of voices that complicate and add nuance to what is expected of an Arab-American and, by extension, American stories." ■

Alligator and Other Stories (Picador) by Dima Alzayat is on shelves from May 28

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